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Native Village of Tyonek opposes coal project

By MARGARET BAUMAN

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Tribal government officials in Tyonek, southwest of Anchorage on the Kenai Peninsula, are voicing formal opposition to the Chuitna coal project proposed by PacRim Coal, citing concerns on the potential impact on the community's salmon fisheries.

The project "directly impacts our fisheries and spawning areas of the Chuitna River" upon which the community depends for king salmon, as well as sockeye, silver and chum species of salmon, said Angela D. Sandstol, president of the Native Village of Tyonek.

Tyonek Native Corp., the for-profit firm established under the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, has, by contrast, strongly supported development of coal resources for several years, citing a pro-development attitude.

No permits have been issued yet for the mine, but the wheels are in motion.

State mining project officials anticipate receiving by summer the revised applications for permitting of this significant ultra low sulfur, sub bituminous coal resource in the Beluga coal field about 45 miles from Anchorage. Chuitna is projected to have a minimum estimated 25-year mine life, and production rate of up to 12 million tons annually.

In a letter of April 16 to Sen. Albert Kookesh, D-Angoon, Sandstol spoke of the importance of the fisheries to the local population and questioned whether the mine would benefit local residents.

"Developing the lands naturally competes or clashes with the subsistence use of resources on the same lands and water areas occurring in these locations," Sandstol said. "This resource is especially significant because it is surface mining of coal resource. This is coal extracted and exported to foreign countries, and consequently it is of no benefit to local or national efforts toward energy conservation."

Copies of the letter also went to Rep. Woody Salmon, D-Chalkyitsik, Gov. Sean Parnell, and U.S. Sens. Mark Begich, D-Alaska and Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska.

Tyonek, population about 170, is a Dena'ina Athabascan community with a subsistence economy that provides salmon, moose, beluga whale and waterfowl. Some 15 residents have commercial fishing permits, and recreational fishing and hunting guide services are available. Some residents trap during winter months. There is no road access to Tyonek.

As far back as 2006, the Tyonek Native Corp. voiced strong support for a large Cook Inlet Beluga coal-to-liquids plant and expansion of facilities to support such a project.

Tom Harris, chief executive officer of TNC, voiced enthusiasm in September 2006 for plans put forth by the Alaska Natural Resources to Liquids Co.

"The board found your presentation remarkable especially in light of the subsequent announcement of Chuitna Coal SEIS with plans to begin construction in 2007 and the announcement of the new road between Beluga and Point McKenzie, with construction beginning this fall," he said in correspondence to Richard Peterson, president of Alaska Natural Resources to Liquids.

TNC did not respond to a request for a further interview for this article, saying their corporate counsel was busy with board meetings.

Sandstol noted in her letter that TNC and Cook Inlet Region Inc. both have significant interests in development of non-renewable resources on lands adjacent to the 27,000 acres of the core township, which are considered traditional lands with priority for subsistence related activities.

NVT surveyed village residents in a mail-out questionnaire on the community's interests and perceptions of developing the land surrounding the township for mining purposes. The response was "a sentiment of opposition, and a need to protect an existing, traditional way of life the village still retains," Sandstol said.

NVT asserts its tribal governmental status to oppose any development which does little or makes no effort to mitigate competing issues that are diametrically opposed to maintaining a traditional or subsistence way of life, she said.

Sandstol also voiced concern for what she described as a "lack of a cooperative relationship to a tribal government to exercise its jurisdiction over its political domain."

Ed Fogels, who oversees the office of project management for mining within the Alaska Department of Natural Resources, said in an interview April 22 that his agency expects to see revised permit applications for the project from PacRim within a couple of months.

PacRim originally submitted permit applications about two years ago, but the firm is now making some significant design changes, based in part on baseline work that showed the presence of a very old village site, Fogels said. Archeologists working for PacRim and the state were involved in confirming the presence of the ancient site, he said.

Once the permit applications are received, the state will begin reviewing them, with help from the federal Environmental Protection Agency in doing the required environmental impact statement, he said. A major engineering firm, AECOM, has been hired by the EPA to write the EIS, he said. DNR officials estimated it would take six to nine months after receipt of the permit applications before a draft EIS goes out for public review.

The public would then have 30 to 60 days to comment on the draft EIS, depending on the decision of the EPA, he said. Following that, the federal agency would take at least three months to revise and finalize its plan, he said.

The final EIS discloses all potential impacts of such a project, he said. While the state is not required to do an EIS, the federal agency's work is helpful to the state, he said.

"Our job is to make sure the design of the project is as low as possible for those (potential impact) things to happen," he said. "At some point, DNR has to ask whether it is worth the risk."

Fogels noted that water issues related to development of the Chuitna mine would be more a matter of getting rid of surface runoff, of diverting the water and dewatering the mine pit itself. "They are taking existing water and rerouting it around the mine, and they must get a clean water discharge permit," he said.

Kendra Zamzow, an environmental chemist from the Matanuska-Susitna Valley who is employed by the Center for Science in Public Participation, is keeping a close watch on water issues. The nonprofit group provides technical support to citizen groups and tribes on mining issues.

"The overriding major concern is that they are digging this in wetlands and there will be a huge volume of water that they will have to deal with," Zamzow said. "I'm not convinced they know how to control that water. They are going to have to take millions of gallons of water out of the ground and pump it in the direction of the streams."

Zamzow said both the impact of pumping millions of gallons of surface water directly into streams and chemical differences between the surface water and water in the streams could have an impact on the fisheries.

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